



USER'S GUIDE TO THE GENERAL PLAN

PLANNING & BUILDING DEPARTMENT • COUNTY OF SAN LUIS OBISPO
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The San Luis Obispo County General Plan is the foundation upon which all land use decisions are based. Its main purposes are to illustrate the public policy for future land use for both public and private lands, and to provide the County Board of Supervisors, Planning Commission, Subdivision Review Board and Zoning Administrator (Hearing Officer) with specific direction for future decisions affecting land use development.

WHY HAVE A GENERAL PLAN?

California Planning Law requires the adoption of a comprehensive plan:

"Each planning agency shall prepare and the legislative body of each county and city shall adopt a comprehensive, long-term general plan for the physical development of the county or city, and any land outside its boundaries which in the planning agency's judgment bears relation to its planning."

-Government Code Section 65300

There are seven required general plan "elements":

- ◆ Land Use
- ◆ Circulation
- ◆ Safety
- ◆ Open Space
- ◆ Conservation
- ◆ Noise
- ◆ Housing

The first state law requiring the preparation of a comprehensive plan was adopted in 1927. In 1955, the preparation of a two-element comprehensive plan, which included land use and circulation, was required. Housing was added as a required element in 1967, Conservation and Open Space in 1970, Seismic Safety, Noise and Scenic Highways in 1971, and Safety in 1975. In 1984, Scenic Highways was dropped as a mandatory element and Seismic Safety was merged with Safety, resulting in the seven elements that are required today.

In addition to the required elements, a city or county may adopt optional elements. The county has adopted five optional elements:

- ◆ Agriculture
- ◆ Economic
- ◆ Parks and Recreation
- ◆ Offshore Energy
- ◆ Master Water and Sewer Plan

Because all elements of the general plan have equal legal status, the general plan must resolve potential conflicts between or among the elements through clear language and consistent policy.

THE COUNTY'S REQUIRED & OPTIONAL ELEMENTS OF THE GENERAL PLAN

✕ Land Use and Circulation Element (Inland & Coastal)

The Land Use and Circulation Element (LUCE) has the broadest scope of the seven required elements. It designates the general distribution and intensity of uses of land for housing, commercial, industry, open space, education, public facilities, and other categories of both public and private uses. Because the LUCE is so extensive, it is sometimes mistaken for the entire general plan. Through its text and maps, the LUCE establishes the pattern for land use. In addition, the LUCE identifies the general location of existing and proposed roads and provides definitions of road types (i.e., arterial, collector, local). Maps accompanying the area and community plans show the location of roads, their classification and any proposed extensions or realignments.

There are four components that make up both the Inland LUE and the Coastal Zone LUE.

◆ **Framework for Planning**

Framework for Planning provides a comprehensive overview of the county's land use policies and defines land use categories (zoning). In the Coastal Zone, it also contains Coastal Table O, a matrix that specifies the uses that are allowed in each land use category, and provides a definition for each type of use for properties located in the Coastal Zone. This table is located in the Land Use Ordinance for the Inland portions of the County. Framework also sets the guidelines for amendments to the general plan and ordinance

◆ **The Area Plans**

Coastal Zone

- North Coast
- Estero
- San Luis Bay
- South County

Inland

- NorthCounty
- South County
- San Luis Obispo
- Carrizo

The Area Plans are 8 separate reports, divided by watershed and geographic area that contain policies, programs, land use regulations and maps. In the Coastal Zone, each area plan also establishes development standards, called *planning area standards* that set special requirements. These standards are found in the Land Use Ordinance for the Inland portions of the County.

◆ **The Community / Village Plans**

Inland

- Avila Beach
- California Valley
- Creston
- Heritage Ranch
- Los Ranchos/Edna
- Nipomo
- North County Villages
- Oak Shores
- Oceano
- San Miguel
- Santa Margarita
- Shandon
- South County Villages
- Templeton

◆ **Official Maps**

The up-to-date Official Maps of the LUCE show precisely where the land use categories are applied. They act as the county's zoning maps.

- ◆ Within the coastal zone of the county there is an additional component, **the Coastal Plan Policies.**

✧ **Agriculture Element**

The Agriculture Element establishes strategies for protecting and preserving productive agriculture in the county. It identifies those areas of the county with productive farms, ranches and soils. It also establishes goals, policies and implementation measures that will enable their long-term stability and productivity.

✧ **Conservation and Open Space Element**

The Conservation and Open Space Element seeks to conserve and protect important natural resources while balancing the needs of the natural and built environments. This Element establishes goals, policies and implementation measures that promote efforts to prevent or eliminate damage to the environment, support environmental restoration, preserve ecological systems and ensure long term economic, social and environmental vitality. The Energy chapter of this Element was developed to enhance public awareness of energy efficiency and conservation and to adopt policies to move the County toward the production of environmentally sustainable, renewable energy supplies that do not degrade ecosystems.

✧ **Economic Element**

The Economic Element was adopted to establish a commitment to economic vitality, to set priorities for types and locations of desirable economic development and to identify strategies for retaining existing businesses and attracting new ones that provide employment for county residents. The Economic Element's main goal is to recognize the importance of economic activity in enabling the residents to find employment and pursue the lifestyles they value.

✧ **Energy Element (Offshore)**

The Energy Element (Offshore) was developed to enhance public awareness and participation in decisions regarding offshore oil and gas activities and related onshore facilities. It is an educational document that provides a summary of county policy and direction regarding development of off-shore petroleum resources.

✧ **Housing Element**

The Housing Element is an assessment of housing needs for all segments of the community and all economic groups. It provides an evaluation of the county's housing problems, including an analysis of the housing supply and the availability of affordable housing. This Element provides information concerning the amount of land and dwelling units needed to provide a full range of housing, consistent with the California Housing and Community Development Department's determination of the county's regional share of housing need, in the Regional Housing Needs Plan.

✧ **Noise Element**

The Noise Element identifies and evaluates major sources of noise within the county. It defines measures to be used by new development to reduce noise to a level that is not damaging or disruptive. The Noise Element has two parts; the Policy Document and the Acoustical Design Manual.

✧ **Parks and Recreation Element**

The Parks and Recreation Element is an optional element of the general plan designed to preserve and protect the county's existing and proposed recreation resources. This Element establishes goals, policies and implementation measures for management, renovation and expansion of existing, and development of new, parks and recreation facilities in order to meet existing and projected needs and to assure an equitable distribution of parks throughout the county.

✧ **Safety Element**

The Safety Element establishes policies and programs to protect the community from risks associated with fires, flood, geologic hazards, earthquakes, and other natural disasters. In order to reduce loss of life, serious injury, and damage to property, the Safety Element requires safety to be considered in the planning and development process.

IMPLEMENTING THE GENERAL PLAN

In San Luis Obispo County, all required elements of the general plan have been adopted. These elements are implemented through a variety of ordinances that are adopted as part of the county code.

- The *Land Use Ordinance (LUO)* and the *Coastal Zone Land Use Ordinance (CZLUO)* provides the principal method for implementation of the general plan by setting requirements for how particular land uses may be designed and developed. For example, it contains development standards and permit procedures, including features of site design, such as minimum parcel size, required setbacks, building heights, number and design of off-street parking spaces, and standards for grading, drainage and tree removal.
- The *Real Property Division Ordinance* contains the technical regulations and procedures for land divisions.
- The *Growth Management Ordinance* sets an annual rate of growth to ensure it does not outpace the available resources.
- The *Address and Road Name Ordinance* implements the general plan by specifying requirements and standards for naming of roads, addressing of properties and installation of road signs and individual addresses for structures. This ordinance was developed to aid public safety officials in locating properties during times of emergency.
- The *Building and Construction Ordinance*, in conjunction with the California Building Code, Plumbing Code, Mechanical Code, etc., contains the technical code requirements for building construction also implements the general plan.
- The *Public Facilities Fees Ordinance* provides for the collection of fees from certain new development in order to help finance the construction, expansion and improvement of public facilities such as parks, fire stations, sheriff's substations, and libraries.
- *Specific Plans* are a tool for the systemic implementation of the general plan and are adopted as part of the Land Use Ordinance. They establish a link between general plan policies and the individual development proposals in a defined area.
- *Design Plans* are adopted as part of the Land Use Ordinance to provide design-related policies, programs and standards that supplement the planning area standards.
- The County Facilities and Infrastructure Five Year *Capital Improvement Plan* prioritizes facilities and infrastructure improvements, together with funding sources, which will be considered for development over a five-year time frame.

AMENDMENT AND UPDATE OF THE GENERAL PLAN

State law allows the general plan to be amended up to four times a year, with the exception that the plan can be amended at any time to accommodate projects that provide affordable housing. Changes to the general plan, including changes to the land use categories assigned to an individual property, can be initiated by private individuals or by the county. The first step in amending the general plan is to receive authorization from the Board of Supervisors to process the amendment. After an application is submitted, the department forwards the request to the Board. If the decision is made to continue with the review of the amendment and authorization is granted, the project will be reviewed for possible environmental impacts. A staff analysis is prepared and the project is reviewed during public hearings by the Planning Commission and the Board of Supervisors. The Commission can hear an amendment at any time throughout the year. The Board typically schedules these hearings in Spring, Summer and Winter, with a fourth time period held in reserve for special circumstances. Notices of these hearings are printed in local newspapers.

In order to keep the general plan elements up-to-date and to respond to changing issues and conditions, comprehensive updates of entire general plan elements are periodically prepared by the department. These updates include participation by community advisory councils and the general public. For more information, see the “Users Guide to the General Plan Amendment Process”.

STILL HAVE QUESTIONS?

The intent of this guide is to provide an introduction to the requirements and contents of the general plan. Since this pamphlet only presents an overview, more detailed questions can be answered by the Department of Planning and Building staff. The department is located at the County Government Center, in Room 200 of the Old Courthouse at the corner of Osos and Palm Streets in downtown San Luis Obispo. The phone number is (805) 781-5600.

